

DATE 19 Dec 68

PAGE 1

Accord on Release Of Pueblo's Crew Seems to Be Near

By PETER GROSE

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Dec. 18—After 11 months of deadlock, a formula that might permit the early release of the 82 surviving crewmen of the U.S.S. Pueblo appears to have been found at the secret talks with North Korea in Panmunjom.

A draft of a proposed public statement is believed to have been worked out by negotiators at a meeting yesterday, Korean time. This draft is understood now to have been referred back to the two Governments for approval, along with an agreed timetable for the prisoners' release.

Reluctant to raise false hopes, Johnson Administration officials maintained silence about the details of what was termed a highly delicate situation. Earlier, false reports of an imminent release of the servicemen, captive since the intelligence ship was seized Jan. 23, had been discouraged by spokesmen here.

One authoritative source said there would be a further meeting of the negotiators shortly.

More than six weeks had elapsed without significant contact. The latest meeting was the

Continued on Page 10, Column 1

26th in a seemingly futile series of brusque, often rude, sessions between military representatives at the remote village on the Korean truce line.

From the start North Korea has demanded a statement of apology from the United States and an admission that the vessel had violated North Korea's territorial waters. United States representatives insisted that the Pueblo was seized on the high seas and that there was no reliable evidence that she had approached closer than 13 miles to the North Korean coast.

The crux of the deadlock in the last three months is believed to have involved the timing of the release. The United States has insisted that the men — one died of wounds received during the North Korean boarding operation — be set free, preferably at Panmunjom, at the same time as the American statement is handed to the North Korean representatives.

The North Koreans' stand has been that once the statement is in hand, they will inform the United States where and when the men will be set free.

Response in August Noted

The United States statement, it is believed, will be sufficiently ambiguous so that each side can interpret it as it chooses. The Administration's willingness to make an "apology" was apparently conveyed to the North Korean representatives as long ago as May 28.

On Aug. 29, at the 20th meeting, it is said, the North Koreans gave their first positive response. Then the issue of timing became central.

Subsequently, there were enough changes in the international climate to lead Administration officials to believe that the time was ripe for a settlement and that the Christmas holidays could provide the occasion.

The obvious element was President Johnson's decision to halt the bombing of North Vietnam Nov. 1 and the more serious phase in the Paris talks on Vietnam. That situation is believed to have given the Soviet Union the motivation to use whatever influence it could muster in Pyongyang to close the Pueblo affair.

Frequent statements from the crewmen admitting deliberate violation of territorial waters for espionage purposes have been broadcast by the Pyongyang radio and other Communist media. The United States has refused to accept these statements as valid and has frequently charged that they were made under duress.

There is considerable evidence that the prisoners have been generally well treated.

A Father Reports Progress

Special to The New York Times

BERLIN, Dec. 18—The father of a Pueblo crew member who is seeking his son's release said here today that he felt he had made "some progress" in talks in East Berlin with diplomats of the North Korean Embassy there.

Robert Ayling, a 45-year old engineer from Staunton, Va., gave his assessment at the end of a private mission that started in Moscow Dec. 3. In the Soviet capital the North Koreans refused to talk with Mr. Ayling and three Americans accompanying him.

"In East Berlin the North Koreans were much more cordial and we held four or five meetings," Mr. Ayling said. He noted that the embassy had refused his request for an entry visa to North Korea to visit the Pueblo crew, but added: "They know how to contact us."

Mr. Ayling's eldest son, Charles, 22 years old, served as a communications technician aboard the ship.

With Mr. Ayling on his mission were two attorneys, Carl McAfee and Hugh Cline, both of Norton, Va., and Charles Daniels, a friend of the family, also from Norton. Mr. McAfee was involved in the American-Russian exchange of Gary Powers, the U-2 pilot shot down over the Soviet Union, and Col. Rudolf Abel, the Russian spy.

The Americans are scheduled to fly to New York tomorrow en route home.